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Stoll: "I Don't Seek to Destroy Menchú"

Interview by Dina Fernández García

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This week, his name has been in the headlines, including in the prestigious *New York Times*. This is an important change for an anthropologist like David Stoll, whose criticism of Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú kept him for years on the margins of the academic world, where ideological loyalties and political correctness prevail. Professor of anthropology at Middlebury College, Stoll has written and documented a book that very few Guatemalans have read, but many have already demonized. By way of the Internet, Stoll answered *Prensa Libre*'s questions:

Rigoberta Menchú maintains that the testimonio *published in* I, Rigoberta Menchú *is true, and that she will order a scientific investigation to prove it. What do you think about that?*

Rigoberta should do it. I am confident that the results will corroborate my own research.

Do you believe that her book is a lie invented by the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP)?

No. The narrative is so convincing that it could not have been programmed by anybody, especially by a group as dogmatic as the EGP. The fact is that in 1982 Rigoberta was a militant of the EGP. Having joined the movement not long before and being profoundly affected by the

murder of three members of her family, she believed in the ideology and used it to frame the experience of her family and people. I've never said that her testimonial is a lie or a fraud. In fact, one can argue that it was good that Rigoberta told this story in 1982, because it attracted the world's attention to the crimes committed by the Guatemalan army, and in the end that contributed to the signing of the peace agreement.

Rigoberta says that you don't know her, nor have you ever spoken to her.

Rigoberta knows many gringos and we all look alike. Possibly because of this she doesn't remember me. But we did talk at an academic conference near Washington, D.C., in April 1991.

Later, she recognized me at a press conference in July 1992 because she took the occasion to complain about anthropologists, arguing that they don't let indigenous people speak for themselves. A bit later, she claimed I was a racist. I asked her for an interview and, in response, in June 1997 her Foundation requested a copy of my manuscript. I sent it to them. For a year and a half, Rigoberta had access to my research, and she could very well have answered.

She says you want to profit from her to become rich. "He did not put his elegant face on the book cover because it would not sell," she said.

It's true that my face is not as elegant as Rigoberta's, and that it would not sell as many copies.

But my book will never come close to selling the half million copies that hers has sold. Besides, anybody who knows how the class structure works in the United States knows that I could make much more money in another line of work. Gringos like myself don't go to Guatemala to make a fortune. For that, they stay in New York.

Was it hard to find a publisher?

I solicited thirty publishing houses in the United States, more than half of them academic publishers, before finding someone willing to send out the manuscript for review. The aura of sanctity around Rigoberta is very strong. I can't say what editors were afraid of, but they were afraid of something.

What has been the academic community's response to your book?

Very divided. I've received moral support from colleagues who think that issues have to be faced, but I have also faced considerable opposition.

What are the three main arguments in your book?

Rigoberta said that her story was the story of all poor Guatemalans, but the story of a single individual cannot be the story of everybody else, except in a literary sense. I didn't write this book to prove that a Nobel laureate had embellished part of her biography. There are more important issues. First, it is not an accurate account of the problems that her family and village faced before the violence, nor of how the violence reached Uspantán. Second, I wanted to challenge preconceived and romantic ideas about indigenous peoples and guerrilla warfare. Based on my interviews with peasants, I don't believe they were the revolutionary avant-garde that others claim they were. In the third place, when a book becomes almost sacred, it is a sign that it hides contradictions that ought to see the light of day. In the case of Rigoberta's foreign admirers, I think that they have chosen to listen to voices that gratify their own needs, instead of facing Guatemala's complexity.

Rigoberta says that your book is a racist attack sponsored by a group of anthropologists that lives off indigenous peoples and does not allow them to have their own voice.

It is not racist to gather different versions of events and compare them. No other anthropologist has conducted systematic interviews in Uspantán. No other anthropologist has contested Rigoberta's 1982 story. She's not being attacked by a group of anthropologists. Anthropologists have taken too long in questioning the EGP's version of events. Rigoberta has a problem with only one anthropologist: me.

They say that your book will either sink Rigoberta or else make her more famous. Did you think of that when you were writing it?

I don't believe my book will sink Rigoberta. Guatemala needs a symbol like her to think through what happened during the era of violence and to make sure it doesn't happen again. The only person that could sink Rigoberta is herself. I regret that it wasn't possible to publish a Spanish version at the same time, but it's still difficult to publish academic critiques of the EGP's version of events, even when they are based on peasant testimonies. To argue that the war was not inevitable and that it did not emerge from the struggle of poor people, that instead it was a tragedy that arose from the confrontation between Guatemalan patriots of both the left and the right, is still perceived as an apology for the Guatemalan army. But it is not.

In your book, you claim that Mayan don't care if the events described in Rigoberta's testimonial really happened to her or not. What do you think about that?

The accuracy of Rigoberta's testimonial might not be significant to many Guatemalans because it is obviously the truth, in a national sense if not a personal one.

Criticisms

Stoll's book goes beyond the refutation of historical inaccuracies. In his investigation the anthropologist tries: to analyze how political violence reached Uspantán; to defy romantic prejudices about indigenous communities and guerrilla warfare; to prove that rebel movements originated in the urban middle class; to explain why they did not develop roots among indigenous peoples; and to analyze how the academic world constructs the sacred, to the detriment of the scientific spirit.

Translated by Arturo Arias